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AUTHOR Christopoulos, Christina; Dell, Susan B.
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ABSTRACT

An attempt was made to identify aspects of the family environment that predict social competence in the school environment. A total of 69 second graders were administered a revised verion of Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) Network of Relationships Inventory. Social competence was assessed sociometrically and with seven behavioral nominations. Findings indicated that the most consistent predictors of social competence were companionship and instrumental aid. Amount of time spent with mother was negatively related to indices of social competence. For boys, companionship with mother was predictive of disruptiveness. In contrast, aid from mother was positively related to indices of social competence. For boys, the more helpful the mother the fewer nominations they received as starting fights, disruptive, and unhappy. For girls, mother's helpfulness was related to fewer nominations of shyness. If a child spends a great deal of time with mother, she or he may not acquire the social skills needed for interaction with peers. The positive relation of instrumental aid to social competence suggests that it may be more important for a child to feel that the mother is available when needed than to spend a great deal of time with her. (RH)

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Dimensions of the mother-child relationship as predictors of social competence

Christina Christopoulos
Duke University

Susan B. Dell
University of Virginia

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Abstract

Recently investigators have started to examine the family environment in which a child develops to predict social competence in the peer group. The purpose of the present study was to explore which aspects of the mother-child relationship are predictive of social competence in the school environment. Sixty nine second graders were administered a revised version of the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Social competence was assessed with the sociometric procedure and with seven behavioral nominations.

The most consistent predictors of social competence were companionship and instrumental aid. Thus, amount of time spent with mother was negatively related to indices of social competence (i.e., social preference, liking rating, and 'happy' and 'leader' nominations). For boys, companionship with mother was further predictive of disruptiveness. On the other hand, aid from mother was positively related to indices of social competence (i.e., social preference, liking rating, and 'happy' nominations). For boys, the more helpful the mother the less nominations they received as starting fights, disruptive, and unhappy whereas for girls helpfulness on the part of the mother was related to less nominations of shyness. One interpretation of the present results may be that if a child spends a lot of time with mother, s/he may not acquire the social skills necessary to interact with peers. Moreover, the positive relation of instrumental aid to social competence suggests that it may be more important for a child to feel that the mother is available when needed than to spend a lot of time with her.

Introduction

Although investigators have been eager to acknowledge the interdependence of the family and peer worlds in which a child finds him/herself, empirical research addressing this relation has emerged only recently. Such research has primarily focused on observational or parent self-report measures of parenting, and has identified two well-established parenting dimensions as they relate to social competence: warmth and control. Thus, loving and involved parents who at the same time are consistent at enforcing rules tend to have children who are more affiliative with peers than do parents who are rejecting and uninvolved, with or without consistent discipline (Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Hinde & Tamplin, 1983; MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Putallaz, 1987).

In the present study, we decided to take a different approach to the study of parenting; under the assumption that an insider in a relationship is a better informer about that relationship than anybody else, we decided to utilize the children as the source of the quality of the mother-child relationship. Thus, the goal of this study was to explore the relation between aspects of the mother-child relationship as reported by the child and the child's social competence in the school environment.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 69 children who attended second grade in Charlottesville, Va. There were 36 girls and 33 boys from mostly white, middle-class, two-parent homes.

Assessment of quality of mother-child relationship. The children were administered a revised version of the Network of Relationships Inventory developed by Furman and Buhrmester (1985). This measure assessed five dimensions of the mother-child relationship: companionship (a=.63), instrumental aid (a=.48), intimacy (a=.61), conflict (a=.60), and punishment (a=.80). Three items scored on 5-point Likert scales assessed each dimension. Ratings on the three items assessing each dimension were summed.

Sociometric assessment. Individual sociometric interviews were conducted with all second graders with the help of pictures of all the children in each class. Most liked and least liked nominations within classroom were obtained. For each child we calculated a standardized sum of most liked and least liked nominations received. Subsequently, for each child a social preference (z-score most liked - z-score least liked) score was calculated and restandardized. In addition, children were asked to nominate three classmates who best fit seven behavioral descriptions: cooperative, leader, happy, shy, unhappy, disruptive, and starts fights. A child's score on each behavioral description was the standardized sum of all the nominations received.

Finally, each child was asked to rate how much s/he liked to play with each child in his/her classroom on a 5-point Likert scale. For each child a mean liking rating was calculated.

Results

Exploratory backward multiple regressions were conducted to determine the most important predictors of each social competence measure. The results were as follows:

1. Companionship and instrumental aid were the most consistent predictors of social competence.

2. Amount of time spent with mother (companionship) was negatively related to indices of social competence. Thus, the more time a child spent with mother the more likely s/he was to have a lower social preference and mean liking rating score, and to receive less nominations as a leader and as happy (see Table 1). For boys only, time spent with mother was predictive of more disruptive nominations (see Table 2).

3. Instrumental aid received from mother was positively related to indices of social competence. Thus, the more help a child received from mother the more likely s/he was to have a higher social preference and mean liking rating score, and to receive more nominations as being happy (see Table 1). For girls only, help received from mother was also predictive of fewer shy nominations, whereas for boys it predicted fewer nominations as unhappy and starting fights (see Table 2).

4. Intimacy, conflict and punitiveness were three additional predictors of social competence (see Table 2). For girls, intimacy with mother predicted fewer unhappy nominations, whereas for boys it predicted fewer disruptive nominations. Conflict with mother predicted more nominations for girls. Finally, the more punishment girls received from their mothers the more disruptive nominations they received from their peers (see Table 2).

Conclusions

1. Companionship and instrumental aid were the best predictors of social competence. The negative relation between companionship and social competence suggests that if a child spends a lot of time with mother, s/he may not get a chance to spend time with peers and thus acquire the social skills necessary to interact with the peer group. Moreover, the positive relation of instrumental aid to social competence further suggests that it may be more important for a child to feel that the mother is available when s/he needs help than to spend a lot of time with her.

2. From a theoretical perspective the above findings seem to suggest an additional point. The two parenting dimensions that have been consistently found related to social competence are warmth and control. Attachment theory added sensitive responsiveness of the caretaker to the list. The present study raises the issue of whether instrumental aid may be a separate dimension or whether it is a more developmentally advanced manifestation of warmth and sensitive responsiveness.

3. Although self-report measures have been criticized in the past, the results of the present study suggest that the child's own perception of the mother-child relationship may be important as a predictor of his/her social competence in the school environment.

   Validation of the self-report measure through concurrent assessments of the quality of mother-child relationship from other sources (e.g., parent report or observational data) is necessary.

Table 1

NRI Mother-Child Dimensions as Predictors of Social Competence

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variable	β-weight	F	p	r-square
Social preference	Instrumental aid	.11**	4.09	.02	.11
	Companionship	-.11***			
Liking rating	Instrumental aid	.07***	7.13	.001	.18
	Companionship	-.08****			
Cooperative	Intimacy	-.08**	4.92	.03	.07
Leader	Companionship	-.07*	3.37	.07	.05
Happy	Instrumental aid	.12**	4.27	.02	.11
	Companionship	-.11***			

**** p<.001
*** p<.01
** p<.05
* p<.10

Table 2

NRI Mother-Child Dimensions as Predictors of Social Competence By Sex of Child

Criterion Variable	Predictor Variable	β-weight	F	p	r-square
Males					
Starts fights	Instrumental aid	-.18***	7.47	.01	.19
Disruptive	Instrumental aid	-.11*	2.32	.10	.19
	Companionship	.13**			
	Intimacy	-.11*			
Unhappy	Instrumental aid	-.21***	10.65	.003	.26
Females					
Disruptive	Punitiveness	.09***	7.59	.01	.18
Shy	Instrumental aid	-.11**	3.87	.03	.19
	Conflict	.09*			
Unhappy	Intimacy	-.11**	5.50	.02	.14

*** p<.01
** p<.05
* p<.10

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